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5 September 1961

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MEMORANDUM FOR ACTING DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL
INTELLIGENCE

SUBJECT: The Likelihood and Consequences of Renewed
Hostilities in Laos

1. Within the next few weeks the Geneva Conference phase of the Laotian crisis will probably give way to some sort of political arrangement or to a resumption of general hostilities in Laos. At present, the prospects for a negotiated settlement are dim. There are wide differences between the Western and Bloc positions on a number of major points at issue at Geneva, and the Bloc participants, confident in their strong bargaining position, have shown no inclination to compromise for the sake of reaching agreement.

2. Even general agreement among the major Western and Bloc powers at Geneva would not necessarily assure a political "solution" in Laos because of the mutual suspicions and conflicting intentions among the Laotian elements represented by the three princes, Souphanouvong, Souvanna Phouma and Boun

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Oum (reading from left to right). Souvanna Phouma and his neutralist element are completely dependent upon the Communists for support, and Souvanna could not agree to terms which were not acceptable to the Communists. Boun Oum and General Phoumi almost certainly do not intend genuinely to seek a negotiated political settlement. Phoumi is still hoping for a military solution and probably would not accept a political settlement unless the US forced him to do so.

3. Hostilities in Laos might be renewed by either the Pathet Lao/Kong Le side or by the Phoumi side. Both have certain motivations. General Phoumi's political and military situation has become very weak and he probably believes that his only remaining hope is a renewal of hostilities in which he would have outside assistance. If he thought he could resume hostilities in such a manner as to bring the US into the conflict, he almost certainly would do so. Moreover, General Phoumi has a capacity for self-delusion as to the extent of US commitment to him. On the other hand, the Pathet Lao side may be anxious to press its military superiority in Laos in expectation

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of a quick victory. There is evidence that both sides are planning and preparing for a resumption of military action.

4. The Pathet Lao side will almost certainly undertake military action in the near future to eliminate Meo resistance in the Xieng Khouang area, and it probably will step up military activity in north and northwest Laos in response to recent operations by the Phoumi forces and Chinese irregulars. Either of these operations could expand into a resumption of hostilities throughout Laos. If the Pathet Lao forces are unable to reduce the threat to their position from Phoumi and Chinese irregular troops in northwest Laos, it is likely that the Xieng Khouang government would ask for and receive assistance from nearby Chinese Communist forces, following the precedent of Burma.

5. Any estimates as to the strengths of the Communist and neutralist forces in Laos are highly speculative. At present, there are indications which would support estimates as high as 16,000 Communist Pathet Lao troops and 12,000 neutralist troops -- 6,000 commanded by Kong Le and another 6,000 under Kham Ouane. These forces are supported by about 1,500

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Communist Bloc personnel, nearly all of them from North Vietnam, who operate the logistics and communications systems, man the field and anti-aircraft artillery, and provide technical and tactical guidance at all levels of the PL/KL effort. In addition there are indications that as many as 2,000 - 3,000 North Vietnamese armed forces are posted in Laos along the Vietnam border. These troops are used as special assault forces, and they constitute a trained and equipped reserve immediately available to back the local forces in the event of an RLG offensive. During the past four months the Pathet Lao and Kong Le forces have consolidated their military positions and have improved their logistical situation. Their troops are now astride access routes to Luang Prabang, Vientiane, Thakhek, Savannakhet, Pakse and Saravane, the major Laotian towns remaining in the RLG hands.

6. The capabilities of Phoumi's armed forces have improved somewhat over the past four months as a result of US training efforts and the continued influx of equipment and supplies. According to payroll figures, the Laotian Army consists of

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38,487 men, of whom 29,249 are classified as combat effectives, and the Auto Defense Corps consists of 13,800 men. However, judging by the forces Phoumi has been able to deploy at various times in the past, we believe that these figures are heavily padded. In the numerous skirmishes which have taken place since the cease fire, the Laotian government troops, except for the Meo guerrillas, have shown little will to fight. They still abandon positions when brought under mortar or artillery fire. The Laotian government's logistical support of its troops in the field continues to be poor and the field commanders are for the most part, indecisive, weak, and without strong motivation.

7. Consequently, we believe that the Pathet Lao forces, with supplies now in their stockpiles, could seize any or all of the towns remaining in government hands within a very short time. If Phoumi were to take the initiative and concentrate his forces for an attack on Pathet Lao concentrations -- for example, at Vang Vieng (north of Vientiane), or Nhommarath (east of Thakhek) -- he would probably make some initial

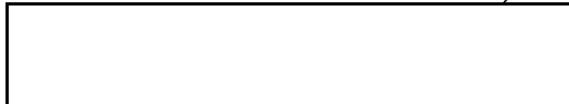
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advance, but it is unlikely that he would be able to retake any major objective or withstand a counterattack. In short, if hostilities are resumed, and if the Pathet Lao troops initiate an attack on the key Mekong towns or are provoked by Phoumi into such an attack, US or SEATO combat forces would probably have to be operational in Laos within 2 or 3 days to prevent the loss of the key Mekong towns.

FOR THE BOARD OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES:



SHERMAN KENT
Chairman

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